

THE FRENCH-CANADIAN PEASANTRY

LANGUAGE, CUSTOMS, MODE OF LIFE, FOOD, DRESS

While the forces of change and progress are rapidly obliterating the ways of our ancestors, and civilization with giant footsteps is trampling out of sight even the ancient landmarks, the French-Canadian peasant still preserves the same old customs and habits which his progenitors from Brittany and Normandy transplanted to Canadian soil. The traveler through the province of Quebec may, amid many of its surviving cherished memorials, easily fancy himself among the romantic scenes and striking events of French colonial life of more than a century ago. Not only are the old fortifications which protected the city of Champlain from the assaults of Wolfe, Levy, Montgomery, and Arnold still extant to challenge the admiration of the sight-seer, but the children of their defenders, the same race with the same characteristics, mental and physical, and speaking the same language, may be seen walking the streets of the old rock-built city.

Intelligent observers familiar with the provinces of France, whence the ancestors of this people came, have frequently noted and commented upon the fact. The descendants of the Bretons, for instance, can easily be distinguished by their features, loyal disposition, and strength of will even to obstinacy. Their marked bodily vigor and fervent piety are other traits. The Normans are equally conspicuous for somewhat different physical and mental qualities. They are shrewder in business, gayer, and of more sociable disposition. They also are loyal and pious, but less excitable than their fellow countrymen of Breton extraction.

The French-Canadian peasant, *habitant*, is generally of small or medium size, of compact well-knit frame; his powers of endurance against fatigue and cold are simply astonishing. He is usually of dark complexion, with sparkling brown eyes. His quiet, thoughtful face, often dull, wears a contented expression, but he brightens quickly in merry response to a joke or a lively remark, chatting easily and with animation. If at all educated or a politician, he puts his powers to effective use and makes for his side or party a strong case. His head, in size and contents, is a good one. Along the north shore of the St. Lawrence one meets with varied types, for the original settlers intermarried with Indians, English, and Irish, with such physical results as might be expected. Thus you will often see peasants

with features and complexion corresponding to those of the foreign strain, of Saxon fairness, or freckled, with massive red beard, answering to English, Scotch, and Irish names, and yet unable to speak a word of English. Some of the farmers boast of descent from families of the old nobility of France, who, without means to leave Canada after the cession, were forced to settle down on farms among their former servants and dependents. Those nobly descended are easily distinguished by their courtly bearing and dignity of manners, apart from their aristocratic names.

The women (*créatures* as the men call them), while not generally pretty, are mostly pleasant-faced brunettes, whose dark hair and dark brown eyes form a considerable part of a beauty's endowment. They are usually strong, quiet in movement, inclining to be stout as they advance in years. Many of them attract by their agreeable, kindly expression, though of course some of them are impulsive enough. They are simple-minded, virtuous, and pious, with frankness of manner. They lead a primitive life, with sturdy labors through the day and early evening. When not engaged in the common home-duties of caring for the children, cooking, or attending to the cattle, or helping the men in the fields during harvest-time, they sew, spin, weave, and knit. Many of them clothe the whole family by their industry, requiring but little from the stores and cities. In their habits, cleanliness rules conspicuously, the fact impressing any stranger who may visit their houses. They are orderly as well. They crave but little mental stimulus; they read almost nothing but their Prayer-Books, which explains their similarity of ideas, as well as of sympathies, social, religious, and national. But the dwellers near the cities show a difference in those habits and feelings of late years, the interchange of opinion being here wider, more varied, and modern, strangers and travelers touching their long dormant thought with notable influence.

It has been stated somewhere, that "One of the best means of knowing the character of a people is a knowledge of their language." With this truism in mind I desire to correct certain erroneous impressions which exist concerning the language of the French Canadians. Among the British portion of the population in Canada and the people of the United States, the belief is wide-spread that they speak a mongrel dialect—a *patois*. It is true that the uneducated speak ungrammatically and inelegantly, use old words belonging to the dialects of Normandy, Picardy, and Brittany, and often employ words in their old relation instead of the new; but this does not constitute a *patois*, such as we hear in many of the provinces of France, where people of one district cannot understand the language of those living in an adjoining one.

The following is a specimen of *patois*, submitted with the view of emphasizing this fact: The Breton peasant exclaims: *Koi ché donc d'ol bête vient abimi mes lentils?* which, rendered in English, means: "What is this beast which comes to destroy my lentils?" Any one familiar with the French language will see the vast difference between the two cases.

A Parisian would have no more difficulty in understanding a French-Canadian *habitant*, than an educated American the peculiarities of expression of the illiterate of cities or country districts in the United States, who say: "I don't s'pose there ain't nobody seen nothing o' no old felt hat nowhere," or "I feel powerful weak," etc. The Frenchman may, however, be more mystified if he listen to the speech of the working classes of the cities, who use English words pertaining to matters technical and connected with trade. He would find it difficult to know what they meant by *J'ai une job* (*ouvrage*)—"I have a job." *Où est le Boss?* (*maitre*)—"Where is the master?" *Je m'en vais à la shop* (*magasin*)—"I am going to the shop." The exigencies of life in a new world have also, as in the United States, caused the people to coin words which are not found in *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*. The following are a few samples: *poudrierias*, *balture*, *bordée de neige*, etc.

The peasant speaks without English admixture, but he will say, *Il mouille* ("It wets"), when he should say, *Il pleut* ("It rains"); and he will speak of his *butin* ("plunder"), when he means *effets* ("goods"). These are instances of misuse of words. A few more: if he wish to describe a child who wears out his clothes quickly, he will say, *C'est un vrai petit usurier* ("He is a real little usurer"); and he will also say, *Il me tanne*, instead of *Il m'impatiente* ("He wearies me"). Instances of corruption of words are numerous. One frequently hears, *Ah! que c'est d'vealeur*, when a great misfortune is implied, and he should say, *Ah! quel malheur* ("Ah! what a calamity"). Many nautical terms are applied to land matters: *Embarquez à cheval* ("embark on a horse"), instead of *montez à cheval* ("mount a horse"); *Ben grée* ("well rigged") for *Bien fournit* ("well supplied"); *amarrau*, in lieu of *attaches*; *cordeaux*, in place of *guides*, etc.

The professional and educated classes speak good French, but they have not the same aptitude for ornate phraseology, nor can they turn a compliment as neatly, as their compatriots on the other side of the Atlantic. They are not as fluent speakers either. It may be well here to remind some of my readers that most Parisians do not speak pure French, but a corrupt French, bristling with a constantly varying slang (*argot*), which the cultured class, the academicians especially, regret exceedingly. The intonation and accent of the French Canadian are often provincial,

recalling the old Normal, Provençal, and Breton. They also frequently use Anglicisms; but, in spite of the latter drawback, they have written well enough to carry off prizes from the natives of the mother country, in competition with some of their best writers. Both Louis Honoré Fréchette, the national poet, and L'Abbé R. H. Casgrain, have had that distinction. The English in Canada will seldom speak French, fearing to make blunders, while the French Canadian does not hesitate to use the Anglo-Saxon language, even if he speak it imperfectly.

Philip Gilbert Hamerton, in *The Intellectual Life*, states: "When a foreign language has been acquired (there are instances of this) in quite absolute perfection, there is almost always some loss in the native tongue. Either the native tongue is not spoken correctly, or it is not spoken with perfect ease. . . . Rare indeed are the men and women who know both languages—French and English—thoroughly." There are many French Canadians who speak their mother tongue fluently, and with absolute accuracy as to grammar and choice of expression, and yet have a fair command of the English language. Some of their political leaders, notably Hon. Wilfrid Laurier, speak alternately in French and English in the house of commons at Ottawa, and it would take a well-trained ear to tell which is his mother tongue. But one does now and then see in the French-Canadian press such Anglicisms as, *Rencontrer ses paiements* ("To meet his payments") instead of *Faire honneur à ses engagements*, and *Faire une application au parlement* ("To apply to parliament") in lieu of *Présenter une pétition*, or *une demande*, etc. For many years past the "purists," or sticklers for unalloyed French, have been making determined efforts to extirpate Anglicisms, stimulated by the active intervention of the Royal Society of Canada, and the co-operation of the press and critics generally. The effect is already perceptible in the greater purity of language and amendments of style of the writings of the *littérati* and diction of the public speakers.

The poorer *habitants* live in cabins resembling the ancestral domicile on the other side of the Atlantic, the only changes being designed to meet the conditions and necessities of the more rigorous Canadian climate. They are built of logs and clay, high-roofed, covered with shingles or thatched (*en chaume*). They are usually about twenty feet square, white-washed and of neat appearance, one apartment on the ground floor, with the attic generally used to store grain, etc., and lighted by one pane of glass at each end. Quite close to the cabin may be seen a small baking oven (*four*) with a pent-roof of boards, the stable and barn a little farther off, and a modest vegetable garden in front or at one side. There is

ordinarily a porch, or *tambour*, with a double door for defense against the heavy snowstorms and bitter winds, one window on each side, with two more in the back part of the house.

On entering the visitor finds himself in a square room used as bed-chamber, kitchen, and parlor. In the dormitory portion of the apartment is a high wooden bedstead of simplest make, and another arranged in tiers, bunk-fashion, for the accommodation of the large families for which the race is noted. Some of the younger children sleep in cribs or trundle-beds, kept in the daytime under the large parental bed and drawn out at night near the cooking-stove, which is of the long, two-storied style, standing in the centre of the room, surrounded by a pile of logs or small firewood. In summer the children sleep in the attic, and at that season the fire is kept on a large hearth at one end of the house.

In one corner, reaching from a few feet above the floor to a point near the ceiling, are wooden shelves painted green or blue, and upon them are massed some of the household treasures, such as pewter plates, mugs, delft and earthen vessels. Hanging from one of the cross-beams is the old flint-gun, known as *le vieux fusil français*, with the powder-horn and bullet-mold, which rendered good service in many a contest with the Indians and English, as well as in innumerable hunting exploits. This weapon is an heirloom prized and guarded with zealous care. They often possess a more modern gun of the long-barreled sort, such as is used for duck-shooting.

In another corner may be seen the snow-shoes (*raquettes*) with which the *habitant* in winter travels over his fields, and the beef moccasins (*bottes sauvages*) for summer use. A few plain three-legged stools, some wooden chairs with wicker bottoms, one or two rocking-chairs (*berceuses*) of rustic make, one heavy, spacious wooden trunk serving as both wardrobe and seat of honor, a settle-bed, and of course the kneading trough, generally sum up the furniture. Most households have a spinning-wheel and a loom. The floor is sometimes covered with a rag carpet (*catalogne*), and the walls are covered with old newspapers.

Above the bed is a wooden cross painted black, below which is the sprig of blessed palm in a small bottle or vase (*benitier*) containing holy water, and close by the religious calendar of the diocese. This twig of palm plays an important part in the religious ceremonies of the household, around it clustering beliefs of impressive character. It is credited with the power of exorcising the evil one and preventing a stroke of lightning to the house. It is renewed each Palm Sunday, the old twig being carefully burned. Some houses will have a miniature chapel with

altar, cheap vases, and plastic figures of saints. On feast days these are illuminated with tiny candles, and before them the inmates will prostrate themselves in prayer. In many households a fiddle and bow occupy a conspicuous place on the wall. Religious prints, highly colored pictures of the Saviour, the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and other saints, in touching attitudes of suffering or devotion, adorn the walls. Those of the blessed Mother of God or the Pope hold the place of honor in some districts, while in others St. Vincent de Paul or St. Jean Baptiste are the favorites.

I am reminded of a surprise I experienced one day in seeing the walls of the house occupied by a young Protestant Briton covered with pictures of the "noble army of martyrs." As discreetly as possible I expressed astonishment at his partiality for such prints, when he explained that to them he considered he owed his wife. Shortly after his arrival in Canada he happened to visit a farm-house where he saw similar pictures, with which he was unfamiliar. The daughter of his host, a pleasant, bright-eyed girl, seeing his ignorance of martyrology, eagerly sought to persuade him of the merits and distinctions of some of the saints, and their labors and sacrifices. These recitals, together with the charms of the fair talker, left deep impress upon his heart. From that moment he found himself more interested in all pertaining to the saints, calling frequently for more enlightenment, with the result that before he could become thoroughly informed in saintly records, he was completely in love with the farmer's daughter. He has since held all the saints of the calendar in high regard, gratefully recognizing that to them he owed his charming wife, and secured for him the sweetest companionship for life.

But to return to the abodes of the peasants. The houses near the cities or of the well-to-do are larger, have more rooms and conveniences than those just described, and are usually built of stone. Most of them have the same high-pitched roof covered with shingles, and occasionally one will be seen with the second story projecting beyond the first. The ceilings are low, with supporting beams visible. These houses are better furnished, but in other respects they resemble the poorer; the general manners and customs of the inmates of both being almost identical. There is often a large baking-oven connected with the house itself, and a well at a little distance from it. There are well-kept gardens and orchards in close proximity, the sole care of the women, and from which they derive quite a benefit by the sale of vegetables and fruits.

The owners of the better class of houses leave them in summer to be occupied by strangers, living themselves in adjoining out-houses. They make an honest penny not only in this way, but by selling provisions and

waiting on their tenants or driving them about the country. Life in these out-buildings wears a picnic aspect, jollity and social ease prevailing.

All houses occupied by the people are blessed by the *cure* shortly before or after their completion. It is a ceremony many think indispensable to avert misfortune and disease. Their religion teaches them that all in this world comes from and will return to God, and that it is through his gracious goodness we are enabled to enjoy all we possess. These facts command their continual gratitude. They will thus stop at the sound of the Angelus to say a short prayer three times a day, and cross themselves before beginning or completing every act of their lives. Everything they own they offer up to God, thanking him that they are permitted to enjoy these blessings. As soon as the house or out-building has its walls raised, they attach to the chimney or to one gable a few branches of palm (*le bouquet*, they call it) and discharge some fire-arm by way of salute. For what purpose they affix this *bouquet* is difficult to ascertain, except that it is a custom of their ancestors, as they will tell you. But doubtless there lingers in the mind some pleasant association, even with the unlettered, of the branch that is always connected with triumph and victory, and that was waved before our Lord on his entry into the chosen city. In France the workmen still follow this custom, and there it is done to remind the owner that he is expected to celebrate the event in some social way.

An interesting feature of the domestic picture is the large group of healthy, merry children, whose boisterous mirth keeps the house in an uproar. If the people have with much reason been credited with habits and dispositions of patriarchal simplicity, they no less resemble the ancient race in the strength of their domestic affection and love of offspring. The race is vigorous, the country large, and modern views and Malthusian theories, which check the population of lands more thickly settled, are as yet unknown in the old St. Lawrence region. How else could some sixty-five thousand of them, defeated, dejected, and abandoned colonists at the time of the cession in 1759, have swollen into the mighty flood of population, some one million seven hundred thousand at the present day, engaged in the cultivation and development of British North America's illimitable resources?

Before the cession a royal bounty was granted to all young men marrying before the age of twenty, and to young girls wedding before sixteen. Parents who had more than ten children were also in receipt of a royal gratuity. In most households there are from a dozen to sixteen children, and even as many as twenty-eight. Two prominent officials of the province of Quebec are twenty-sixth children, and fine specimens of physical

development and mental culture they are, too. Recently the parliament of Quebec passed a law granting a lot of land of one hundred acres to all parents who have twelve or more living children, and already over one thousand applications have been made for the provincial bounty. Formerly children were made to take their meals at a small table at one end of the room, generally sitting on one of the logs kept near the stove, until they had made their first communion. It appears that the logs were used for mincing meat as well, with the other end turned up. In their little quarrels the older children used to taunt the younger, saying: "Oh, you still eat off the block!" and much humiliation was felt.* *Apropos* of large families, there is a story which deserves mention. A peasant, whose means were not in proportion to his wit, perpetrated a joke on his priest, the outcome of which must have been gratifying to one in his straitened circumstances. He called one day upon his pastor, bringing with him his twenty-sixth child, born to him that morning. "*Monsieur le curé*," he said, "by the laws of my country and church it is my bounden duty to hand over to you the twenty-sixth portion of all the natural products which God in his goodness may send me. I consider children are included in that category, and I therefore leave with you this afternoon my twenty-sixth child, just presented to me by my good wife." The *curé* appreciated the peasantry, although poor himself, for the parish was in the back concessions of land, newly cleared, and the tithes—formerly the tenth portion, now the twenty-sixth—were consequently small; but he smilingly replied: "I accept my share of what Providence has bestowed upon you in its wise dispensation. But do not keep the child from his mother. Take him home and board him at my expense, and later on I shall pay for his schooling."

The garb of the peasantry exhibits the extreme of plainness. The coarsest homespun, worked up without dye or polish, the materials as dull in color as they are rough in texture, forms the staple of the suit, the monotonous brown or gray of which sadly needs the contrast afforded by the colored sash (*ceinture fichée*) about the waist, and the blue or scarlet of the nodding *toque*. They wear beef moccasins stretching near to the knee in summer, and cloth shoes and leggings (*mitasses*) in winter. The moccasins are all made round about the toes, and for this reason old country people sometimes call the French Canadians *round toes*. The wife's (*la bonne femme*) dress is of the simplest description, composed of a warm woolen shawl, a blue skirt or dress of homespun, and a neat linen cap, frilled and tied under the chin. For church-going and holiday occasions,

* *Mémoires Philippe Aubert de Gaspé.*

many of them can produce a cheap East Indian shawl, which is carefully laid away at other times. The children are dressed somewhat like the parents.

This remarkable conservatism in dress was originally due to the influence of the popular leaders, spiritual and temporal. Aware that the peasant's taste naturally ran toward display, regardless of expense, they felt it was wisest to recommend the use of articles solid and useful. This economical disposition has done a great deal to promote the success of the people as colonists. They were strongly urged to raise from the soil all required for their sustenance, to make their own clothing and tools as well, that they might become independent of outsiders, especially of the English, their old-time natural enemy. They were also stimulated to spread, multiply, and take possession of the land—*Emparons-nous du sol* was the watch-word—in order to become a power in North America. Well-meant and sensible as was such counsel, it might not have been so generally followed had the peasant had opportunities of seeing the outside world and noting the different styles prevailing in domestic and other matters. But communication with cities and towns was difficult and expensive till a few years ago. Since, however, they have had this want supplied, and been enabled to see so many pictures of the large stirring cities, their humors, fashions, and prevalent spirit, that it is impossible to confine them within the old grooves of habit or oblige them to follow with anything like fidelity the former ideals set up for their guidance. Some of them now discard homespun for garments of modern make, build themselves better houses, which they furnish with some luxury, keep servants and carriages, and have more abundant *cuisine*. In fact, of late many show much weakness for personal display and extravagance. The clergy essay, but in vain, to correct this disposition. It is said that they spend ten times more on dress, carriages, and fast horses than the same class in France. Formerly self-denial was their rule of action, backed by self-reliance. The farm and household work was divided impartially among the different members of the family, no outside aid being necessary. Many a farmer has had to mortgage heavily his homestead, as the result of his foolish disregard of the wise counsel of his chieftains.

They generally enjoy good health, vigor, and animal spirits. Many an old man and woman can be found who have never spent a dollar for medicine since their birth. Nearly all enjoy the social weed in the form of smoking; chewing is rare. And their smoking seems seldom hurtful with their steady nerves and simple habits. The race is, generally speaking, temperate; of course, with many, an occasional drink of whisky or

beer comes not amiss. Their diet is exceedingly plain. The farmer is an early riser, leaving bed by four in summer and five in winter. Just before the morning meal he takes his dram, *petit coup d'appetit*, the beverage being usually whisky in which he has infused some absinthe leaves. He is careful not to allow the younger children to see him; he will take it *à la cachette*. The first meal of the day consists of a platter of skimmed and sour milk, in equal proportions, with buckwheat bread broken and soaked in the milk. Dinner is served shortly before mid-day, the bill of fare comprising pea soup in which pork has been boiled with green herbs. The pork is generally eaten with molasses. The dessert is a bowl of new and sour milk, mixed with the bread, as for the morning meal, but they add maple sugar at this repast. After dinner all take a nap, servants and family alike. Supper comes when the work of the day is ended, and consists again of new and sour milk, with cold potatoes and whatever pork may have been left over from dinner. Occasionally an infusion of hot water and toast, under the name of coffee, is taken. Near the rivers, lakes, and coasts fish is freely eaten. During harvest time, *la moisson*, each worker is given a hunch of bread and a piece of cold boiled pork to carry to the fields for the noon-day meal, which he eats with a clasp-knife carried in the pocket for that purpose. They have an odd way of cutting the bread and pork; they hold the sandwich in the palm of the left hand, and while pressing one corner of it against the thumb, they cut a piece off with a circular motion. They next stick the end of the knife into this piece and carry it to the mouth. The process is a peculiar and striking one. With a draught of water the meal is complete.

Of a Sunday they enlarge their dietary, treating themselves at breakfast to thick pancakes, *crêpes*, made of wheaten flour and milk, cooked with butter, and eaten with maple sugar or molasses. Another article of indulgence is roast pork, *pore frais*, the drippings of which, *graisse de rot*, are much appreciated by them, and also a stew, *ragoût*, of pigs' feet. In summer they seldom eat meat, but they use it in winter when game is abundant. When they kill cattle and pigs for market, they often keep certain portions for family use, which they bury in the snow and dig up as wanted. The ruling idea is to live on the humblest fare, made up of such things as are not convertible into money. All their meals are eaten with a relish begotten of pure country air, abundant exercise at the healthiest and most invigorating of occupations. The diet of the better class of farmers is more liberal, resembling that of the corresponding class in cities, but they do not, as a whole, eat meat as freely as their British neighbors. On festive occasions, like New Year and Easter, they treat their guests with

liberality, giving them cold meat-pies, *tourtières*, and a cake, *croquignoles*, not unlike the doughnuts of New England, and such other dainties as they can afford, not omitting spirits.

On Friday no meats are eaten; fish, eggs, and pancakes being most in use, and bean soup also. Lenten season and the fasts of the church they faithfully and rigorously observe, using meats only during certain days of the week, and only once then. When they sit down to table they all make the sign of the cross and invoke God's blessing, *Benedicite*; after meals they offer thanks, *Deo gratias*, and again cross themselves. At table general hilarity prevails, and if one be noticed to eat less than usual he is at once rallied to indulge more freely.

All their soups, meats, and stews are served in one large dish, *à la gamelle*, which is placed in the centre of the table. They break their pieces of bread, drop them in the main dish, and then scoop them out with spoon or fork till the appetite is satiated. This custom is called *sauces*, and the parent is heard now and then saying to a child whose appetite is flagging, *Sauce donc, mon cher*—"Dip in, my dear."

As a boy I remember, while out fishing at a place some forty miles below Quebec, near the village of Montmagny, calling at a farmer's house at dinner-time, and being invited to join the family circle. I hesitated for a moment when asked to help myself from the main dish in the family fashion, but a long walk had so sharpened my appetite, that when I was urged a second time I threw *mauvaise honte* to the dogs and acted upon the principle, "In Rome do as the Romans do," and I live to tell the tale.

Prosper Bender

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